

Wake Up with Jacob sermon series
Sermon #4 – Struggling to Be Transformed
August 7, 2005
Kory Wilcoxson

Today we conclude our journey with Jacob, having traveled quite a distance over the seven chapters in Genesis. We've also seen quite a change in Jacob from chapter 25 until now. Remember when we first met him? Early in his life, we saw that Jacob survived by controlling situations to fit his needs. He fooled his brother Esau into giving up his birthright, and he tricked his father Isaac out of his fatherly blessing. How could God use a guy like this to carry out his promises?

Esau was so mad at Jacob for what he had done that Jacob had to flee for his life. While in exile he had a dream about a ladder of angels, and during the dream he heard God grant him the same blessing that God had given to his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac, a promise of blessing and land and prosperity. God also promised Jacob that God would always be with him and that God's promises would be fulfilled through him. In return, Jacob promised to accept God has his own, to make room in his life for someone other than himself. He agreed to share the one thing he had grasped at his whole life: control. This was our first clue that something was at work in Jacob; this self-centered and self-serving opportunist was changing.

Jacob settled in the land of Haran with his uncle Laban. Laban had two daughters, and Jacob fell in love with the younger one, Rachel. He agreed to work seven years for Laban in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. But on the wedding night, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying the older daughter Leah instead. Jacob, who had previously survived on his wits, had been outwitted. And yet his love for Rachel was so strong, he agreed to work another seven years for Laban in order to marry her. Once again, we see continued change in Jacob. The one who has spent his life grasping at things he wanted now chooses to give away something, once again moving beyond pure self-interest to bring others into his life. The fulfillment of God's promise of blessing looked to have hit a dead-end with Jacob; now there is reason to hope that God can indeed work through this situation. But not without more struggle.

Jacob ends up with two wives, Leah and Rachel, along with their maidservants, Zilpah and Bilhah. Jacob turns into a baby-making machine, churning out 11 sons and a daughter through the four women. God then speaks to Jacob and says, "Return to the land of your ancestors and your kindred, and I will be with you." So he takes his now considerable family and heads back to his homeland.

His twenty years away from home doesn't mean Jacob has forgotten what he did to his brother Esau and Esau's threat to kill him. Although God has promised Jacob that "I am with you," Jacob doesn't completely trust in that promise. He still is compelled to take matters into his own hands. So Jacob, ever the diplomat, sends a party ahead to tell Esau that he is coming and, by the way, if you're still mad, he has a lot of goats and camels and donkeys and bulls he can give you to help you forget those childhood memories.

Remember, Jacob stole Esau's birthright, which was basically Esau's entire inheritance. And then he stole their father's blessing, which was a promise of success and prosperity. Jacob fled right after that, and hasn't seen Esau since. Jacob

knows he had been changed, but Esau doesn't know that! The party returns and reports that not only have they talked to Esau, but that he is coming out to meet Jacob, and he's bringing four hundred men with him. Either Esau is planning a big group hug or revenge. Jacob, who has been in conflict with people all his life, especially with Esau, is anticipating another struggle.

This impending meeting is weighing heavily on his mind when he lay down to sleep that night. He was restless, and every little noise spooked him, so he sent his family to the other side of the river for the night so he could be alone. But he wasn't alone for long. Jacob does indeed have another struggle, but not with Esau. Instead, very abruptly we are told that someone wrestled with him until daybreak. The original Hebrew says it was "ish," a man. The Jewish Midrash says it was an angel. Jacob himself believed it was God.

That would be only appropriate, since Jacob has been struggling with God all his life, struggling for control, struggling to get the upper hand, struggling to prove that he didn't need God. But even though Jacob had been struggling against God, God had been struggling with and for Jacob. Jacob, who has lifted rocks to make an altar at Bethel and who lifted a large stone slab off a well in Paddan Aram, cannot get the best of this stranger. But neither can the stranger overpower Jacob. Instead, the man gives Jacob's hip a wrenching blow, leaving him wounded.

As the sun starts to come up, the stranger asks to be let go. Why didn't Jacob let go? He's had a sleepless night, he's worn out from struggling, his hip is on fire with pain. Why didn't Jacob let go? Barbara Brown Taylor says it's because Jacob got hold of someone who "smells like heaven," and the manipulator in Jacob knew there was something to be gained.

"I will not let you go until you bless me," he says. Once again, Jacob striking a deal that leans heavily in his favor. Once again, Jacob living up to his name, "the grasper," "the supplanter," "the deceiver."

"What is your name?" Jacob had been asked that before. It was by his blind father, as Abraham prepared to give his fatherly blessing. Then, Jacob had answered, "I am Esau," and stolen what didn't belong to him. This time there is no pretense. This time, he claims the dubious name he has spent his life running from: Jacob.

Jacob was used to taking things from people. At that moment, the man takes something from him. He takes his name. No longer is he Jacob, the one who deceives. He is Israel, the one who struggled with God and who overcame. He is no longer Jacob the supplanter; he is Israel the survivor. No longer does he see himself as others see him, the heel-grabber; now he sees himself as God sees him, the one who perseveres.

The stranger departs, leaving Jacob with a blessing and a bum hip. Jacob couldn't have one without the other. God's blessing often comes through struggle, and the reminder of the struggle is also the reminder of the blessing. Through his struggle Jacob saw the face of God and lived to tell about it. What is a limp compared to the glory of that?

This story took on special meaning to me during my last year of seminary. I preached on this passage for a class in the fall of 2000, and in the spring of 2001 I had my first symptoms that would lead to my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. You know what those symptoms were? Weakness in the muscles on my left side, including my leg. Do you know what weak muscles in your leg make you do? They make you limp. Through

seminary I had struggled with God for understanding, and now as I prepared to leave for ministry, I was leaving with a limp.

I was scared. Scared of my own body, scared of what the future held. Like Jacob fretting over Esau, our moments of struggle are the time when we are most afraid of what is to come, when we feel most alone. But it is also the exact time when we encounter God face to face. Some people will tell you that if God loved you this wouldn't be happening, that if God really had a hand in your life that it wouldn't be so scary and it certainly wouldn't hurt.

But Jacob tells us that God is there in the midst of our struggles. He tells us to hang on for all its worth, to demand a blessing, and to not let go until you have one. I was blessed through my struggle as I learned the power prayer can have in your life. I was transformed in my understanding; God got bigger for me in that time. Transformation doesn't take place when we're safe and comfortable and have everything under control. It happens in the midst of struggle. When we lose our grasp on control, our only choice is to move forward on faith, and growing in faith always means we will be changed. We can choose to ignore it, or we can take it head on, wrestling with it until we emerge transformed.

It won't be easy. It will probably mean a struggle, maybe more than one. You may limp away from the encounter. Anyone who dares enter deeply into life with God walks with a limp. Anyone who has raised children walks with a limp. Anyone who has invested themselves in a congregation walks with a limp. Anyone who tries to follow Jesus day by day by day in their dealings with others walks with a limp. Struggling with God leaves its marks on us.

But you will also leave with a new name, a name that describes you as God sees you. Can you hear it? Can you hear your new name? For me, it was "minister," a name I'm still trying to figure out. For you, it might be "teacher" or "leader" or "elder" or "servant." Maybe your new name will be "survivor" or "helper" or "role model" or "friend."

Jacob's new name was Israel, for he had wrestled with God and had overcome. But there's more. The next morning, when he went out to meet his fate with Esau, his older sibling ran up to Jacob and threw his arms around him in a huge bear hug. Jacob's transformation from selfish trickster to man of God was complete. And Jacob heard another new name: "brother." And he was home.